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FROM THE FRONT—HOME!

BY A BRITISH OFFICER

[The following communication was written by a British officer with the expeditionary forces of the Indian Army, who was wounded last autumn in an engagement near La Bassée, but has now resumed his command.—THE EDITOR.]

SOMETHING has struck you just behind the thigh. It feels a heavy blow—something big, in the nature of a sledge-hammer or cannon-ball. "Dash it, I'm hit," you murmur, instinctively; and yet it cannot be. What hit you was too big. You wonder what on earth it can be. Perhaps a bomb that failed to explode—or a large piece of one.

All this flashes through your mind as you lie there in the snow, with the enemy just across the road still shooting and throwing bombs at you. Very soon you realize it is a wound, all right. It is cold and wet and clammy, and is feeling sore. You look round to see what has happened to the others. Only two or three have arrived. Are they coming? You wait. No signs of them. Your Subadar is near you; he has followed you in the rush. The rest have been stopped. "What's happened, Subadar Sahib? Where are the others?" "I don't know, Sahib; they haven't come." "Subadar Sahib, I'm hit." "So am I, Sahib," comes the answer. "We can't take the trench alone, Subadar Sahib, so we'd better try and get back out of it." You crawl back and away, being shot at all the time, wondering vaguely why they don't hit you. After what seems an eternity you get back, report what has happened, and one Sepoy is told off to help the two wounded officers back. The communication-trench is full of men; to struggle past them means too much pain. You decide to chance the bullets and keep to the open. It is a slow, long walk, a thousand yards at snail's pace. You realize you are lucky there are no bones broken, but you wonder to what extent it is possible to bleed. The Subadar says he is only slightly wounded, too, but you are conscious that he is very

depressed. He maintains he is in no pain, but he has lost his air of quiet confidence. Suddenly the reason comes to you. His faith has been shaken; he is a devout Mohammedan, and has without ostentation told you that very afternoon that he will not be hit—"for these things are in the light of God." You realize now why he is upset. His faith is the faith of one who imagines much prayer will make him invulnerable, and at the moment he is shocked. Later he will reason it all out and regain his inward peace. And so you struggle on through the night till you reach the village where the billets are (for it is midnight or later—everything happens at night in modern war). Arrived at the cottages, you go into the room where the first little beam of light comes from. "Where is the first-aid post?" you inquire. "Second turn on the left, about two hundred kilometers off." Off staggers the trio into the darkness again. Eventually a kind officer to whom you confide you are wounded pilots you through the intricacies of a farm-house, and there, in one of the minor rooms, is the doctor busy bandaging a crowd of Sepoys. There is a small fire in an outer room, and here, cowering over it, is a British officer. He seems to be bandaged everywhere. Presently you discover it is the gallant Sapper who went to the trenches to boost the Germans out. Unfortunately the Germans got the first hit. Poor fellow! he is very plucky. He tells you with quiet humor he is not badly hurt anywhere, but is hurt more or less everywhere. This you see from the bandages—on hands, feet, and head; he is waiting for a stretcher to take him to one of the wagons. In comes the doctor: "Well, where are you hit?" You tell him, and proceed to remove your equipment. The doctor ruthlessly applies scissors to the tails of your shirt; it goes to your heart—you have but one other. Then comes the examination, for which the Sapper at the fire wakes up and takes interest. "Here, you see, is where it went in, and here it came out," the doctor remarks. "Just missed the hip-bone," says the Sapper, adding, "It's made a bit of a hole." Eventually the first-aid bandage is applied. Next comes the Subadar, who, it appears, has a slight wound through the inner part of the thigh. This is also bandaged, and again we sally forth into the night, with hazy directions as to the whereabouts of the ambulance-wagons. Another crawl for a half-mile or more. One is beginning to feel faint and wonder how much longer it will be possible to walk. Stray bullets keep coming up the road. These stray bullets have followed you throughout your wanderings, and you pray that

one will not find you just at the end of your goal. At last you come upon the wagons standing in the road. You ask for an officer, and are directed to a house. On entering, you find it is the temporary mess of some reinforcements put up to relieve the troops in the trenches. Among them you find some old friends that you did not know were even in the country. When they hear you are wounded, rum and hot water are immediately offered and accepted. The drink puts new life into you. Three or four real Egyptian cigarettes are pressed on you, and you are taken to the medical officer in charge of the wagons. Here you and your Subadar are parted, for he has to be conveyed to the Indian portion of the field ambulance. A seat is found for you in one of the wagons, which will start when full—luckily the wait is not longer. You are helped up into the wagon and feel your way in darkness to the farther end and sit down; this you find a painful operation. Then commences the long drive in. That drive will never fade from your memory. The wagon is a heavy concern, drawn at a slow walk by two heavy horses that keep slipping on the frosty road. It is bitterly cold and utterly dark as you creak along a road full of filled-in “Jack Johnson” holes. How long it takes to cover that three miles of road you cannot tell, but it feels a century. Each bump gives you a painful jar and makes your heart ache for the other poor fellows lying silently in the stretchers, of whom you caught a glimpse as you came in. Soon you are conscious of some one sitting opposite you breathing through his mouth and giving a little sigh occasionally. Presently a hand touches your own; you close on it and give it a little squeeze. “Where are we?” says a gentle little voice in broad Scotch. “It’s all right, laddie; we are in the ambulance-wagon.” There is a long pause. “You an officer?” “Yes.” Long pause. “You wounded?” “Yes.” Long pause. “I’m in the Black Watch. The officer took my name. I lost my head and got among the Germans.” “You badly hurt?” “No; but I can’t see.” The voice is very faint and indistinct. It dies away, and one doesn’t care to fatigue the sufferer by asking questions. After another long pause the voice continues, painfully. The three things it harps on are the fact that he lost his head and got in among the Germans alone, that his name was taken, and that he can’t see because his eyes are bandaged. You try and cheer him up and tell him not to worry, that it will be all right now. He relapses into silence for a while, and then painfully goes over those three points again, adding, “It was a bomb that done it.”

At last the long, painful drive comes to an end. The field ambulance, situated in a beautiful French château, is reached and you are taken through the inviting gates into light and warmth. It is a busy night—the busiest they have had. As you enter the ward you are directed to, you feel a sudden sickness and faintness; you are helped to a chair by the fire and given some warm milk. That warm milk is the best drink you have tasted in your life. The room stops going round and you recognize opposite you with surprise a brother officer in your regiment. You discover he was hit about the same time as you, in a different part of the line, and found his way back by another route. Seated near him is a wounded German prisoner. His arm is in a sling, but he seems blissfully content. You question him. He turns out to be an Alsatian. He will not admit to being glad at his capture, but his whole appearance gives his answer the lie—he is one smile all over. You await your turn for dressing in the room crowded with wounded lying on stretchers; the dressing is being done in adjoining rooms, and you anticipate the groans and cries of victims. This you find is another fallacy. Never a groan or cry reaches your ears. The perfect silence of the sufferers is perhaps more horrible than anything. Your turn comes; you are bandaged in a corner. The place is full of cases being bandaged, while on the table in the center you see your Sapper friend being prodded about for pieces of bomb; in absolute silence he lies through the ordeal. You are bandaged, and shown into the officers' mess to wait. Here you find all the less-severe cases also waiting. To-night is a busy night, and the overflow is shown to the mess. Here you sit from three till nine. The sitting position is a kind of refined torture, but the warmth and peace and quiet is just heaven compared to the strain and noise of where you have come from. Nothing can exceed the thoughtfulness and kindness of the surgeons; busy and overworked as they are, they still dash in for a moment to see if you are all right; give you a coat, a blanket; throw more wood on the fire; help you with a pillow or offer you a cigarette. Such attention and kindness you never expected from any but a woman. The gentleness, kindness, and thoughtfulness of the medical officer, whom you had hitherto always regarded as callous and hardened, comes to you as a wonderful surprise. At 9 A.M. you are "evacuated"—this means "moved on." Motors arrive, and you are slid in on stretchers and buzz off to the clearing hospital eight miles off. Here you are taken in and wait on the stretcher till your

train is ready. Again you are impressed by the kindness of the medical staff. Food and drink is provided for you; the memory of that cold tinned chicken and glass of champagne will never leave you. It is your first meal in twenty-four hours, excepting some bread and jam that was the only food available in the field ambulance. Your attention is drawn to the case alongside you—he has his left arm bandaged and another bandage over his eyes and nose; his right hand is black with congealed blood and mud, as is his mouth and chin. You recognize that breathing through the mouth, and every now and again that little sigh. This is confirmed presently by the slow, gentle voice with its Scotch accent; he is answering the doctor's question: "I don't think I'm badly hurt, but I can't see." Later he repeats the three things on his mind. The doctor cannot understand him, and you explain. Then he is comforted, told where he is, and that it will soon be all right. You ask the staff what is going to become of you. The answer is, "Train to Boulogne and then home, probably." The idea of home gives you a wild delight; you cannot believe it; it is too good to be true. You understand that the final decision rests with the officer at Boulogne. How you pray that his decision may be favorable to you! In a few hours the train is there. Again you are packed in the motors and taken off. Not a little amusing is the anxiety and troubles that occur over the poor remnants called kit that accompany officers. One is clasping a sword and cap. Another is anxiously inquiring after a revolver and "Sam Browne" that have gone astray. A third has a massive valise that always gives trouble, as it has no name on it and has to be described at every change. The description is, "It was green, but is very old and has given way at the right side, which is tied up with string." Various officers, nurses, and orderlies go in search, each murmuring to himself, "It was green, but is very old, etc., etc." Arrived at the station, your stretcher is raised and pushed through the window of the compartment; it is a difficult operation, but the hospital orderlies and stretcher-bearers regard it as a point of honor that the patient is not to be jarred or jolted. The care with which they handle the wounded is beyond praise, and it is marked everywhere. Once in the train you are told that you can settle down. It is 3 P. M., and you understand you will arrive at Boulogne at 8 A. M. The luxury of the train is such contrast to life in the trenches that it feels like heaven. Orderlies spend their time up and down the corridor attending to the wants of the wounded. You are

presented with a pair of slippers, a tooth-brush and comb, and a packet of cigarettes. What more could the heart of man desire? You are offered pajamas, but the thought of changing your clothes presents an ordeal that you put off till to-morrow. You doze, and are awakened for tea: it's delicious. Again you settle down until dinner. "What will you drink?" asks the orderly. "What can I have?" you reply. "Would you like a whiskey-and-soda?" You nearly spring out of your berth at the joyful words, and when he finally produces a real whiskey-and-soda you gaze at it fondly and sip it as though it were nectar. Thoroughly happy and contented with your meal and your surroundings, you settle down to a real good sleep. Here you meet with your first big disappointment. Every time you doze off some one comes and tells you the Germans are advancing and you must get your men out and dig. You expostulate that you are wounded, that the men are also wounded, and that you don't know where your men are, and in any case neither you nor they are fit to dig. It is all of no avail—you've got to turn out and dig support-trenches, wounded or not. You prepare to get up and the pain brings you to wakeful consciousness. So you settle down and presently doze off again, but the nightmare follows you through the night and leaves you with an oppression long into the day. On arrival at Boulogne another disappointment awaits you. A train of wounded has just short-headed you, so you are turned round and sent off to Havre. The journey is painfully slow, but the hardest thing to bear is that the decision of your fate as regards home has been postponed. All through the day you travel; it is a glorious day, and you revel in the beautiful scenery, finding it difficult to realize that this gorgeous country is being ravaged by war. The only disturber of your peace and boredom is the engine-driver. At intervals during the day he finds it necessary to bring the train to an instant standstill. The jolts nearly fling you off your bunk, and must have opened every wound on the train. If one could have got hold of the offender one would gladly have cut his throat with a very blunt knife. At midnight Havre is reached, and here the sitters and the stretcher cases are separated—the sitters, or cases that can sit up—stay at the Gare, while we of the stretchers are taken to the officers' hospital. Up the stairs and to the left; you suggest walking up, but are sternly rebuked and carried. Once in the ward, you are undressed, supplied with pajamas, and put to bed. In come two orderlies who proceed to wash you all over; it is a weird

operation, performed piecemeal between two blankets, but is most comforting and refreshing. Then follow tea and biscuits, after which you try to sleep, but are again worried by German attacks and digging trenches. Next day you find you have come under petticoat rule, for beautiful nurses surround you, who attend to your every want—if you will remember to address them as “Sister” and not “Nurse”—the latter is met with cold disapproval. Being a mere soldier, some of the more personal attentions are at first not a little embarrassing. The protection of a screen does not afford the desired exclusion. Later in the morning comes the examination of the surgeon, followed by inoculation against tetanus. You await his decision breathlessly, and give a huge sigh of relief when he decides that you are bad enough for home. Three of the sitting cases are diagnosed to be well in ten days, and they are ordered to remain at Havre. Your heart bleeds for the poor fellows; they are not serious, you know; still, even three days at home with their friends and relatives would do more to buck them up and make them forget for a while the strain of the fighting than any length of time in Havre. But orders are orders, and they take the decision cheerfully like men, but one cannot but feel that it is a mistake. The next question that arises is—when will the hospital-ship be in. The *Asturias* is due at 3 P.M., they tell you; when she arrives you will go on board. She arrives at 4.30 P.M., and your departure is postponed till after breakfast next morning. You settle down for the night. After all, it is only one more day in France instead of England, but to some of the wounded who had not been home for seven or five years that extra day meant a lot. Still, there was every comfort in the hospital, and nothing could exceed the kindness of the nurses—I beg pardon, I mean the sisters. Again the night is made hideous with dreams. This time the Germans have broken through at Ypres, and Havre has to be fortified. Vainly you protest that if they have got so far, a few wounded can’t dig trenches sufficient to stop them. It is no use, you must turn out and dig for your life. This continues through the night, and you are left with the firm impression in the morning that the line is broken, so much so that you can barely refrain from questioning the sisters on the point. Breakfast over, you impatiently await transit to the ship; this, however, is again postponed, and in the mean time you are got ready. Your going-away suit would bring in a fortune at a music-hall. It consists of a field-service cap, pajamas, long, white, knitted

stockings pulled over these, black felt slippers, a muffler, coat—warm, British—and finally a sword. You carry the latter for fear of losing it. Word comes at last to start. You bid good-by to the nursing sisters, thanking them gratefully, and away to the ship, where you arrive for lunch. Here you are given a sumptuous cabin to yourself. The ship, you find, sails on the following morning, so prepare for another night of battle-dreams. At 6 A.M. the following morning you weigh anchor and start for Bonnie England. You ask the orderly if it is true that the passage takes eleven hours; he answers, in a pained voice, “No, sir, never more than nine and one-half.” The dressing of your wound is enhanced by a slight feeling of *mal de mer*. But nothing matters, now you are nearly in sight of the white cliffs. At 4 P.M. you reach Southampton. Here another excitement ensues—where will you be sent? One batch is ordered to Torquay. You wonder will you be sent within a day’s journey from home. No. Luck is in your way—you have drawn London. But the London train is the last to go. No matter; you wait patiently till 8 P.M., then off again. This time the carriage is just one long one, crowded from end to end. There is some discussion as to whether you are a lying or a sitting patient. Seeing an empty bunk, you proceed to lie on it and then argue. Presently tea is served in blue mugs. You sip, and place it where the orderly won’t see it—you do not want to hurt the man’s feelings, even though he has evil designs on your stomach. You wish he could taste the tea Tommy makes in the trenches—that might shame him. Another orderly pulls up alongside your cot with pencil and paper. You know the formula by heart now. During your journey the pencil fiend has dogged your footsteps; every one remotely connected with the hospital who owns a pencil and paper has taken upon himself or herself to ask you a searching list of questions which is promptly committed to paper. Even such intimate details as your age last birthday are not omitted.

The train pulls up at Waterloo at 10.30 P.M. You find some kind friend with influence has seen your name in the list of wounded and arranged for you to be taken to a select and private hospital. Here you arrive at midnight with all your troubles ended. “When were you wounded?” they ask. You mention the date. “You’ve been very quick,” they say. Quick! two hundred miles in five days! You can’t help wondering how long the Germans would have taken.

A BRITISH OFFICER.